

## The Mother of All Sanctuaries: Deep Feminism and *bassēter*, “in Secret,” in Psalm 139:15

J. Gerald Janzen  
Christian Theological Seminary (*emeritus*)

### Abstract

The present study reconsiders the line, “I was being made in secret [*bassēter*]” in Psalm 139:15. In all its twenty-three other occurrences, *bassēter* connotes safety from detection and hostile intervention, and, more specifically, safety *in God’s sanctuary*. Several verbs in Psalm 139:13–15 resonate with their occurrences in Exodus in relation to *the tabernacle* and to Israel’s *safety* as “set apart” by God. The application of *bassēter* to God’s creation of the psalmist, as the core of the psalmist’s praise and knowledge of God’s works (v. 14), suggests that the “ancient way” the psalmist asks to be led in (v. 24b) may refer to God’s generous mother-love that brought the world (and the psalmist) into being. This distinctive “way,” grounded in the creative sanctuary / *bassēter* of God, is the basis for the psalmist’s safety in the face of evil. Significantly, God’s “ancient way” is contrasted with a “wicked [lit. idolatrous] way” (v. 24a), right after mention of God’s enemies (vv. 19–22). Could these two “ways” reflect a contrast between radical *safety in vulnerability* (safe in the sanctuary of God’s love that founded the world), and *safety through main force* (as found, e.g., in the Babylonian account of creation through conflict)? Are walls such as those of Babylon an idolatrous contrary to the walls of the mother’s womb?

---

*The psalmist in a sense never leaves the womb; he regards his life as one of seamlessly sustained favor established in the womb and continued throughout his life outside it.*

— WILLIAM P. BROWN

In the present study, which focuses on the phrase, “in secret” (*bassēter*), I propose to show that Psalm 139:13–15 identifies the existential origin and continuing foundation for the thematics of divine refuge as associated with the sanctuary in the Psalms and, indeed, in the Bible as a whole. That the psalm likely was composed later than the other psalms referring to God’s “secret place” of sanctuary does not, I think, vitiate such a proposal, but may go to support it. For in general, the search for what is originating and foundational begins with surface discoveries, and moves in stages until arrival, at last, at what is of first and enduring import.<sup>1</sup> I take Psalm 139:13–15 to provide just such an imaginative “depth” report—following the vein of Psalm 22:9–10<sup>2</sup> and Jeremiah 1:5—of the experiential basis of confidence in God vis-à-vis one’s enemies. I shall begin with the existential situation of the psalmist.

### The Existential Context of Psalm 139:13–15

The psalmist—beleaguered by haters of God who would threaten her life by enticing her to idolatry—cries out, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; / test me and know my thoughts. / See if there is an *idolatrous way* in me / And lead me in the *ancient way*.”<sup>3</sup> As Goldingay says, that “ancient way” is the “way that goes back to Israel’s beginnings before its corruption”—the corruption in question being the idolatry of the golden calf. Before this idolatry, Israel’s ancient way was its origin in the exodus, its responsive covenanting with God at Sinai, and God’s provision for a sanctuary. For this psalmist, there is a personal “ancient way” that anchors and protects her in the face of the idolatrous enticements and dangers that beset her. That personal way is recalled when she makes her affirmation in verses 13–15. By way of suggesting the resonance between Israel’s and the psalmist’s respective “ancient ways,” I note several features of verses 13–15.

First, “I was being made in secret [*bassēter*]” is generally taken to mean that God’s action is totally hidden, known only to God. Goldingay writes: “No human being witnesses that intricate process. It happens in secret. But it is not concealed from YHWH.”<sup>4</sup> However, this takes the Hebrew phrase in a sense peculiar to this passage. In its twenty-three other occurrences, *bassēter* or *bēsefer*-X always con-

1 A case in point: The present essay was conceived and written only after the publication of my collection of exegetical essays entitled, *When Prayer Takes Place: Forays into a Biblical World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012). This essay, belated as it is, identifies the foundation, theologically speaking, for all the others.

2 I shall cite biblical references as in English translations; scholars who consult the original texts will know how to adjust for differences where applicable.

3 In so construing the Hebrew, I follow John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 3: *Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 639; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, WBC 21 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 253; and Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 545.

4 Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 635.

notes a place where an action or situation is not only hidden, but *safe from negative intervention*. It is hard to suppose that the issue here is with the safety of God's action! Rather, the issue is the psalmist's safety.

Secondly, the Psalms repeatedly use the noun, *sēter* (Pss 27:5; 31:20; 32:7; 91:1), along with the verb, *sāter*, "to hide" (Pss 17:8; 31:20; 64:2), of God's sanctuary as a refuge.<sup>5</sup> Third, that *bassēter* in Psalm 139 resonates with this sanctuary theme is supported by several verbs in verses 13–15. *Intricately woven* (*ruqqamtī*) occurs elsewhere only in reference to the weaving of tabernacle hangings. *Knit together* (*tēsukēnī*), in its noun form, *māsāk*, refers, in twenty-two of its twenty-five occurrences, to a woven tabernacle screen. And, underscoring *bassēter* as connoting safety, the verb "set apart" (*niplāh*), often rendered "wonderfully made," occurs elsewhere only in Exodus, of Israel set apart for safety, and in two psalms, where it also connotes safety.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, celebration of God's "works" (plural) in verse 14 as "awesome" and "wonderful" generally concerns God's foundational works in Israel's history. These details converge in such a way as to characterize the mother's womb as not only a place of origin, but also a sanctuary, the place of refuge *par excellence*.

### Psalm 139:13–15: Form as Content

In this section I shall show how the form of verses 13–15 communicates their content. The text below is largely an amalgam of the NRSV (as my base text), the KJV, and (in line three) John Goldingay's translation.<sup>7</sup> Also, I translate the last word in line 1 literally, and in line 4 I attempt to echo the Hebrew verb-less sentence as an ejaculatory exclamation.

It was you who formed <u>my kidneys</u> ;	(line 1)
you knit me together <i>in my mother's womb</i> .	(line 2)
*I praise you, for awesomely am I set apart.	(line 3)
Wonderful your works!	(line 4)
that <u>my soul</u> knows very well.*	(line 5)
<u>My frame</u> was not hidden from you,	(line 6)

5 As Jerome F. D. Creach shows, in his *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), *refuge*, as conveyed by a whole family of verbs and nouns, is one of the central themes of the Psalter, beginning with the last line of Psalm 2, "blessed are all who *take refuge* in him." The noun *sēter* and its verbal cognate are integral members of this thematic family.

6 Such a connotation may be supported by the verb in v 15, "my frame was not hidden [*nikhād*] from you," construed as in 2 Sam 18:13, where a soldier refuses to act against Absalom for fear of David's avenging wrath, "and there is nothing hidden [*yikāhēd*] from the king." With such a construal of the verb in Ps 139:15, contrast the confidence of the psalmist in Ps 138:6 with the assumption of the ungodly in Ps 10:11–12, that "God will never see" nor "call to account" their assaults on the innocent (similarly, Ps 73:11); and with Job's fears to the same effect (Job 22:13–14).

7 Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 633: "because I was set apart awesomely."

when I was being made *in secret*, (line 7)

intricately woven *in the depths of the earth*. (line 8)

Here I note five rhetorical points that interweave to convey meaning. (1) In the three-fold repetition of the prepositional phrase “in-” with spatial connotation (lines 2, 7, 8), the first and third (*in my mother’s womb* and *in the depths of the earth*) are social/material loci that encompass the second (*in secret*), which indicates the existential significance of those loci.

(2) Lines 3 and 5 are bracketed by the identity in form and sound of the opening syllable in line 3 (*’ôdĕkâ* in “I praise you”) and the closing syllable in line 5 (*me’ôd* in “very well”). In this enclosure, the verbs “I praise you” and “I know” are thrown into close semantic interaction around their focus on God’s wonderful works; and these three lines lie *within* the opening and closing “in” phrases, underscoring that this knowing praise arises within an “insider” standpoint.

(3) This “insider” standpoint of the psalmist is signaled in another way, by the positioning, and the shifts in the subjects and the voice (active/ passive) of the verbs. In lines 1–2 God is the subject of two active verbs (formed, knit), while in lines 3–8 the remaining six verbs have the psalmist as their subject. Then, in the central section, lines 3–5, the two active verbs, of praising and knowing, enclose the first passive verb, “am I set apart.” This implies that among the wonderful works that the psalmist praises and knows is the experience of being “set apart” in safety.<sup>8</sup>

(4) The shift from active to passive voice signals a shift in focus from God as acting, in lines 1–2, to the psalmist, in line 3, as the one *undergoing* and *experiencing* these actions as they unfold, and in some sense therein *knowing* them. The psalmist thus casts herself as having been in some sense privy to those procreative acts, and now recollecting those acts *as one who was there to experience and know them and to praise God for them as they occurred*. This I take to be the significance of the shifts in the subjects and voices of the verbs of these verses, from God to the psalmist, and from active to passive voice.

(5) Another triad identifies the results of God’s creative actions in “my kidneys,” “my soul,” “my frame.” Here a particular difficulty confronts the translator. Each of these terms—Hebrew, *kĕlāyōt*, *nepēš*, and *’ešem* (or *’ošem*)—refers, in the first instance, to some aspect of the person’s natural/ physical body. The first refers to the kidneys, the second to the breath that fills and animates the body, the third to the encompassing (sic) skeletal frame. But each term, in ancient Hebrew understanding, also carries psychological and ethical/ spiritual connotations. As H. Wheeler Robinson put it in a classic essay:

8 As Israel was “set apart,” or made “distinct,” in Exod 8:22; 9:4; 11:7; 33:16.

There is no distinction [for the ancient Hebrews] of the psychical and ethical from the physical[.] . . . Psychical and ethical functions are considered to be just as appropriate to the bodily organs as the physiological[.] . . . [M]an's consciousness, with its ethical qualities, was thought to be so diffused through the whole body that the flesh and bones, as well as the mouth, eye, ear, hand, had a quasi-consciousness of their own.<sup>9</sup>

The content of the psalmist's *praise* and *knowledge*<sup>10</sup> is something that, we may say, the psalmist feels in her very bones, with every breath that she takes, and in her very kidneys. This praise is, at the time, the nascent organism's "here I am!"<sup>11</sup> in response to the divine "let there be."<sup>12</sup> When the psalmist engages *now* in such praise, I suggest, it is a conscious surfacing of that originary, elemental praise, that originary, below-consciousness knowing, which has continued to resonate in and as the psalmist's inner depths—in the psalmist's kidneys, soul, and bones. As William Brown has it, "the psalmist in a sense never leaves the womb; he regards his life as one of seamlessly sustained favor established in the womb and continued throughout his life outside it."<sup>13</sup> In support of such a construal of the origins and depths of the psalmist's knowing, in verses 13–15, I want to adduce some lines of argument and evidence from extra-biblical disciplines.

## Deep Subjectivity and a Deep Hermeneutics

Thinkers in various disciplines propose that all forms of organic existence not only display an objective exterior, but enjoy a subjective interior (whether conscious or unconscious), a capacity in some mode and degree to register and react to their surroundings. Thomas Nagel throws down the gauntlet to evolutionary biology

9 H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in Arthur S. Peake, ed., *The People and the Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 353–82 (here, 353–54). See also, more recently, Mark S. Smith, "The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 427–36.

10 On the dynamic and epistemological connection between praising and knowing, see Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1985).

11 Compare the thunder and lightnings in Job 38:35; and contrast the untrusting, unresponsive hesitancy in the imaginative "in utero" scenario in Isa 45:(9–)10.

12 As Wallace Stevens has it in his poem, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "A poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the *res* itself and not about it." Just so, the knowing praise is the nascent organism's response to the divine action, its "standing forth" when God calls (Isa 48:13).

13 William P. Brown, "Creatio Corporis and the Rhetoric of Defense in Job 10 and Psalm 119," in William P. Brown and S. Dean McBride, eds., *God Who Creates*, W. S. Towner Festschrift (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 123. Earlier (110) Brown writes: "From beginning to end, YHWH is profiled as an enduring presence, the source of wonder and self-knowledge . . . Knowledge of God affirms and protects the human self, although its potential to convict and correct the self lies ever in the background." I would only reverse the relation between the last two clauses: it is the primal knowledge of God, "as an enduring presence," that "lies ever in the background" providing the "traction" for conviction and correction as needed.

as grounded solely in materialist presuppositions, arguing (as an avowed atheist) for “an alternative secular conception . . . that acknowledge[s] mind and all that it implies . . . as a fundamental principle of nature along with physical law.”<sup>14</sup> In a footnote to his discussion of panpsychism, in which “all the elements of the physical world are also mental,” he refers to Whitehead as arguing “that concrete entities, all the way down to the level of the electrons, should be understood as somehow embodying a standpoint on the world.”<sup>15</sup>

But Whitehead’s pertinence for the present paper goes deeper than Nagel indicates. In his major work, *Process and Reality*, in a chapter titled, “Organisms and Environment,” Whitehead observes, critically, that “[p]hilosophers have disdained the information about the universe obtained through their *visceral feelings*, and have concentrated on visual feelings.”<sup>16</sup> His point is that the five senses are already highly abstract results of the processing of the body’s unconscious feelings of the various forces impinging upon it from its environment. Those feelings underlie consciousness, or emerge into its twilight, as vague awarenesses, dim emotions or moods, and fugitive intuitions. Elsewhere, in writing of religion as “a transforming agency” where “your character is developed according to your faith,” he suggests that “[r]eligion is force of belief cleansing the inward parts.”<sup>17</sup> As with his phrase, “visceral feelings,” the resonance with biblical sensibilities of this reference to the “inward parts” is suggested by the frequent occurrence of the latter phrase in the KJV (on which Whitehead was raised)—Job 38:36; Psalm 51:6; Proverbs 20:27, 30; and Jeremiah 31:33, all in reference to God’s wisdom, truth, spirit or *torah* in that bodily locus.

As though on Whitehead’s heels, Hans Loewald proposes, in a neo-Freudian vein, that modern science’s purely objectivist, materialist construal of the natural world serves the human project of power over nature that proceeds by “repressing”<sup>18</sup> the subjective dimension of nature and rendering it merely, vacuously, “objective.” In contrast, he proposes that “the projection of psychology into the external world—the earmark, according to Freud, of the mythological/ religious

14 Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.

15 Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 57, n. 16. In his late (1938) work, *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead critiques the materialist presuppositions of modern science in a chapter titled, “Nature Lifeless,” and presents his constructive alternative in a chapter titled, “Nature Alive,” concluding, “[t]he key notion from which such construction should start is that the energetic activity considered in physics is the emotional intensity entertained in life.” Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 168.

16 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 184 (II.IV.VII); italics mine. Whitehead repeatedly describes his cosmology as “the philosophy of organism.” In one place—in pointed contrast to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*—he characterizes *Process and Reality* as “a critique of pure feeling” (174 [II.IV.II]).

17 Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960), 15.

18 Compare, below, Marduk’s slaying of Tiamat, in the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish*, and my further comments there.

worldview or ‘metaphysics’—takes place because *there are unconscious forces operating in the external world no less than in the internal world of the individual*.<sup>19</sup> Such a “deeper understanding of nature will widen the horizons of a science of nature and increase . . . its power of mastery, a mastery that involves *yielding no less than dominion*. Such deeper understanding subordinates the traditional view to a more comprehensive perspective on nature as unconscious activity.”<sup>20</sup> With respect to my construal of the psalmist’s *in utero* organic “knowing” as in some sense concurrent with the divine creative activity “in secret,” I note Loewald’s comment that “[u]nison and reverberation, as regards other human beings, is called empathy. But it would be erroneous to assume that this *empathic resonance* stops at the frontier of human mentality. Our knowledge of organic and so-called inorganic nature is likely to derive from similar attunements.”<sup>21</sup>

Like an underground stream, I suggest, this organic, “resonant” awareness in humans underlies and feeds the river of consciousness.<sup>22</sup> In the case of infants, Christopher Bollas calls this awareness “the unthought known,” informing consciousness as elemental moods, images, and symbols. He writes: “Each person’s spatio-temporal idiom reflects the ego’s record of the infant’s early experiences of his place in the object setting. This *body memory* conveys *memories of our earliest existence*. It is a form of knowledge which has yet to be thought, and constitutes part of the unthought known.”<sup>23</sup>

For their part, the evolutionary neuroscientists Panksepp and Biven report that, in all creatures with post-reptilian brains, *emotional* and *physical* experiences are registered in the same areas of the brain; and, they go on to say, “[o]ur earliest social bonds, when firm and secure, nourish our psychological health for a lifetime.”<sup>24</sup> Such “deep” organic experiences of *enclosed safety and nurture*—what Bollas calls “the unthought known,” and Loewald would refer to as our resonance

19 Hans Loewald, “Psychoanalysis in Search of Nature: Thoughts on Metapsychology, ‘Metaphysics,’ Projection,” in *The Annual of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 16 (New York: International Universities Press, 1988), 53; italics mine.

20 Loewald, “Psychoanalysis in Search of Nature,” 51; italics mine.

21 Loewald, “Psychoanalysis in Search of Nature,” 50; italics mine.

22 Compare the way the Gihon (*gihôn*, “a bursting forth”), the second of the “headwaters” (*rāšīm*) branching from the primordial river in Eden (Gen 2:13), surfaces just outside Jerusalem in the form of the spring Gihon where David has Solomon anointed king to succeed him (1 Kgs 1:32–40); and the way these waters are later brought inside the walled city through the Siloam Tunnel. And then note the association of the verb, *gīh*, with childbirth as a bursting forth from the womb (Ps 22:10; Mic 4:10; Job 38:8). Finally, we have the threefold analogy, in Isa 51:1–3, between primordial Eden, historical Sarah, and eschatological Zion as places of flourishing. The symbolism is suggestive of primal realities.

23 Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 46; italics mine.

24 Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012), 313–14.



with the dynamic, living forces of nature, would be reflected, it seems to me, in later symbolic expressions such as material sanctuaries and psalms of sanctuary.

The question of the symbolic relation between the material sanctuary of the temple and the maternal sanctuary of the womb (that is, the question of which is the reality and which the symbol) receives additional, if inadvertent, illumination in some remarks by Gaston Bachelard in his phenomenological study of the poetics of space.<sup>25</sup> Writing of “the house,” he seeks to “show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.” He goes on: “In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. . . . It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is the human being’s first world.” In critique of Martin Heidegger, he writes: “Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ man is laid in the cradle of the house. . . . Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the home.” Astonishingly, Bachelard overlooks a human being’s first “world,” first “cradle,” first space of warm protection, in the mother’s womb. He fails, then, to appreciate how the human house—and, all the more, the house of God—is the material symbol of the maternal reality. (A house is, so to speak, “our womb away from womb.”) In that more radical perspective, all that he says about the house can be applied to what the psalmist speaks of in Psalm 139. With an eye to Loewald’s and Bollas’s depth-perspectives, and looking forward to the bearing of Psalm 16 on our topic, I shall conclude this section with Bachelard’s comment that

if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. Thought and experience are not the only things that sanction human values. The values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths. . . . [T]he places in which we have *experienced daydreaming* reconstitute themselves in a new daydream, and it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that those dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time.”<sup>26</sup>

I take, then, the various perspectives canvassed in this section to sponsor a “deep” hermeneutics of Psalm 139:13–15 as not simply a poetic conceit, but an imaginative expression of *an originary, deep sense—mediated and symbolized in the mother’s womb—of safety in God as sanctuary*, a sense that arises as an organic awareness in and through the mother’s body, and that continues to exist like an

<sup>25</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



underground stream deep within the psalmist,<sup>27</sup> as the *ancient way* of God with the psalmist, over against the *way of idolatry* that later attempts to tempt the psalmist. That organic sense may arise to consciousness in the form of a fleeting visitation or pervasive sense of wellbeing and security; or it may come to symbolic expression during sleep (Jer 31:26), in dreams and visions (e.g., Genesis 15), or (as in Psalm 16) in counsels of the night.

### Walled Babylon as (Betrayal of the) Womb

I want, now, to introduce another Old Testament theme, relative to the idolatry the psalmist is resisting. In his monograph, *The Liberating Image*,<sup>28</sup> Richard Middleton explores the implications of the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1 vis-à-vis the *imago* theme among Israel's neighbors; and he points to one prominent form of idolatry against which Genesis 1 and its human *imago* are opposed. That idolatry expresses itself in a royal statecraft that models itself on divine creative activity taken to be warlike, conquering chaos and subjecting it by force of arms.

The mythic scenario as set forth in Babylon's central myth, *Enuma Elish*, may be summarized as follows: In the opening scene the primordial pair, Apsu and Tiamat (divinities immanent, respectively, in the sweet waters of the Tigris-Euphrates and the salt waters of the Persian Gulf), "mingle" to give rise to successive generations of gods (immanent in the vegetable and animal life that arises in the delta where the silt from the sweet water settles in the shallow mingling water and builds up). When the younger gods show signs of rebellious turbulence, and Apsu's vizier counsels a war-like response, Tiamat intercedes for these "children," counseling painstaking patience, but Apsu follows his vizier's advice. In the ensuing conflict, Apsu is slain and the younger gods survive.

When they again threaten rebellion, Tiamat's older divine children protest her reluctance to take action against their younger divine siblings, complaining, "You do not love us!"<sup>29</sup> In response to this appeal to her maternal feelings, she herself takes up arms, aided by her lieutenant, Kingu. The young god Marduk arises as his near-siblings' champion, slays Tiamat, slices her body in two, and within her two clam-shell-like body-parts, creates the cosmos together with all its vegetable and animal denizens, humankind being fashioned out of the blood of slain Kingu. In gratitude, the young gods build the (walled) city of Babylon, with its tower-temple a place for their and Marduk's "rest," and they proclaim him their king. As Middleton documents, the human king becomes the *imago* of Marduk, ruling

27 Compare the brook, in Robert Frost's poem, "A Brook in the City"—an "immortal force" that, "no longer needed," has been "thrown / Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone," now traceable only by "ancient maps," yet still obscurely troubling city-folk in "both work and sleep."

28 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

29 *Enuma Elish*, tablet I, line 119.

the world from this walled city that is a microcosm of the cosmos that arises within (sic) Tiamat's dead body.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the dominant thematics of *Enuma Elish*, Middleton shows that God, in the "ancient way" of Genesis 1, creates by non-violent means, means I would characterize as *generative*.<sup>31</sup> In a systematic theological vein, Jürgen Moltmann characterizes that primordial way in terms of Isaac Luria's image of *zimzum*, or drawing back, in which "God creates the world by letting his world become and be *in himself*: Let it be!"<sup>32</sup> In Nicholas Ansell's words, "This '*living space in God*' is described [in Moltmann] by using the German term '*Geborgenheit*,' a 'safekeeping' associated with 'the mother's womb.'" <sup>33</sup> This *Geborgenheit*, literally "hiddenness," precisely accords with *bassēter* in Psalm 139; and Moltmann's characterization of cosmic origins through this feminine, generative image coheres with the Psalmist's characterization of individual origins.

It is just such an originary experience of God's generative creativity that forms the content of our Psalmist's praise-and-knowledge of God. And it *in-forms* the psalmist's implicit *self*-knowledge as *imago Dei*. This is the "ancient way" that the psalmist aspires to remain faithful to, when beset and enticed by those who follow "idoltrous ways."

We may note that this theme of God's "ancient way," in contrast to Israel's idoltrous ways, occurs also twice in Jeremiah (6:16; 18:15)—a prophet who traced *his* deepest self-knowledge to God's knowing him before he was in the womb and consecrating him before he was born (Jer 1:5). In fact, the resonance

30 The Freudian significance of walled Babylon as microcosm of a cosmos that *arises within the slain body* of Tiamat is palpable: These structures represent a bogus attempt to replicate the prenatal safety that these gods once enjoyed within her living body. Insofar as Babylon lives to a considerable degree on fish from the Tigris-Euphrates waters, and the rice that grows in that watershed; and insofar as these rivers and their two major tributaries originate in the north-eastern mountains; the fact that, in the myth, Marduk plants mountains over Tiamat's two (dead) eyes and over her two (dead) breasts, suggests to me a subliminal, if inadvertent, recognition on the part of the myth-makers that Babylon's existence continues in some sense to depend on the intercessory tears and nourishing breasts of this "repressed" Ur-mother. Compare again Robert Frost's poem, "A Brook in the City."

31 Frank Moore Cross identifies Genesis 1, in terms of *genre*, as nearer to the *theogonic* myths of origin (compare the primal "mingling" of Apsu and Tiamat) than to the *cosmogonic* myths (compare Marduk's creative violence). See Frank Moore Cross, "The 'Olden Gods' in Ancient Near Eastern Creation Myths," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. Frank Moore Cross, et al. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 329–38.

32 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 109; and *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 86–93.

33 Nicholas Ansell, *The Annihilation of Hell: Universal Salvation and the Redemption of Time in the Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2013), 148–49. With this *Geborgenheit* compare the theological anthropology of Gerhard Sauter, *Das verborgene Leben* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), an extended reflection, engaged with contemporary thought, centered in the image, "hid with Christ in God," in Col 3:1–4. He offers a penetrating discussion of Ps 139:13–15 on pp. 212–19.

between Jeremiah and Psalm 139 is rather broad, and calls for detailed investigation at this point.

### God in our “Kidneys” (*kēlāyôl*) in Psalm 139, Jeremiah, and Elsewhere

Why, does the psalmist begin her “recollection” of her creation at God’s hands with a reference to her kidneys? Why not a more general reference to her “interior” (*qereḥ*)? Why, specifically, the *kēlāyôl*? And why, given the *deep interior* placement and connotations of this organ, does it formally *fall outside* the enclosure formed by the three “in-” phrases in lines 2–8 as set out above? In my view, the “un-naturalness” of this exterior placement serves to highlight its significance for the psalm, as the key to the psalmist’s self-understanding vis-à-vis the wicked in verses 19–22. To appreciate this, it is necessary to canvass the connotations of the *kēlāyôl* in related contexts.

The related contexts are those that, like Psalm 139:1, 23–24, speak of God as searching and testing the heart. Jeremiah, who, like the speaker in Psalm 139, becomes conscious of God’s creative and consecrating activity in the womb (Jer 1:5), testifies as follows (I revise the key words to conform the translation to that in Psalm 139),

You, O LORD of hosts, judge righteously,  
you try the *kēlāyôl* and the heart (Jer 11:20).

I the LORD search the heart  
and try the *kēlāyôl* (Jer 17:10).

O LORD of hosts, you try the righteous,  
you see the *kēlāyôl* and the heart (Jer 20:12).

This formulaic expression occurs also in two psalms:

You who try the hearts and *kēlāyôl*,  
O righteous God (Ps 7:9).

Try me, O LORD, and prove me;  
test my *kēlāyôl* and heart (Ps 26:2).

It is generally recognized that in these passages the kidneys are (as in H. Wheeler Robinson’s analysis) the physiological locus and metaphor for the human person in ethical and spiritual relation to God; in other words, the kidneys connote the human conscience as a sensitivity toward God’s relational claims.<sup>34</sup> When, in Jeremiah 12:2, the prophet declares of the wicked who prosper, “you are near in

34 Compare an Old Babylonian letter (early Second Millennium, BCE), which includes the sentence, “your thorns have pierced my kidneys [*kelītu*].” In Miguel Civil, et al., *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. 8 (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1971), 75.

their mouths, / yet far from their *kēlāyôṭ*,” he is diagnosing them as devoid of a conscience attuned to God’s presence and claim on their lives.

When, then, Psalm 139 opens and closes on the same theme, using the same accompanying formulaic terms, “try,” and “heart,” in reference to the same issue of loyalty to YHWH vis-à-vis defection to other gods, the conclusion seems inescapable that *kēlāyôṭ* in Psalm 139:13 refers both to the physical organ and to its function as the seat of the psalmist’s feeling-conscience toward YHWH.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to those of whom Jeremiah complains (Jer 12:2), the psalmist’s mouth, in the form of her words in the psalm, and her *kēlāyôṭ* have been at one in their attunement to God since her very beginning in the womb.

Two other occurrences of *kēlāyôṭ* bear on the present study. The first comes in Psalm 73, where the complaint of Jeremiah 12:1–4 comes to fuller expression and, not incidentally, is resolved through the psalmist’s presence in the sanctuary. The sight of the wicked, who prosper, thinking, “How can God know? / Is there knowledge in the Most High?” (Ps 73:11), tempts the psalmist to view his piety as futile (vv. 13–14)—“until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end” (v. 17). Within the sanctuary (emblematic of a foundational, unconscious embodied memory?), the psalmist recalls how, outside of that sacred context, “When my heart [*lēbāb*] was embittered, / when I was pricked in my *kēlāyôṭ*,<sup>36</sup> / I was stupid and ignorant, / I was like a brute beast toward you” (vv. 21–22). But now, regaining the “insider” perspective afforded by the sanctuary, the psalmist affirms his loyalty as exclusive to YHWH (v. 24), in the conviction that “you hold [*’āhaztā*] my right hand, / you guide me [*tanhēnī*] with your counsel [*’āsātēkāl*” (vv. 23–24).<sup>37</sup> The psalmist’s affirmation that “God is the strength of my heart, and my *portion* forever” (v. 26), together with the thematics of God’s counsel (v. 24) as associated with the psalmist’s *kēlāyôṭ*, associates this psalmist’s religious perspective with the psalmist in Psalm 16, a psalm that adds another dimension to the rich connotations of the *kēlāyôṭ* as locus of sensibilities open toward God.

Associated by some commentators with Levitical circles (that is, attendants at the sanctuary), Psalm 16 is a psalm of refuge: Vis-à-vis those who “run after” (*māhārū*) another god (Ps 16:4), the psalmist’s “chosen *portion* and cup” (v. 5) is

35 Compare Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3, trans. Davis Eaton (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.), 350: “The reins are made especially prominent, in order to characterize them, the seat of the tenderest and most secret emotions, as the work of Him who trieth the heart and reins.” Interestingly, the Geneva Bible and KJV render *kēlāyôṭ* as “kidneys” in Exodus and Leviticus, but “reins” (from Latin *renes*, “kidneys”) where the context highlights the moral connotation of the word. Their rendering with “reins” in Ps 139:13 reflects a construal of the word there similar to Delitzsch’s and my own.

36 Compare, again, the image in the Old Babylonian letter, with its “your thorns have pierced my kidneys [*kelītu*].”

37 I note the resonance of these lines with the confident assertion in Ps 139:10 that “even [in the uttermost parts of the sea] your hand shall lead [*tanhēnī*] me / and your right hand shall hold me fast [*’ōhāzēnī*].”

YHWH, in whom is refuge and safety (v. 1). The existential situation, then, is not unlike that in Psalm 139. In this situation, the psalmist affirms, “I bless the LORD who *gives me counsel* [yě’āṣānī]; / in the night also my *kēlāyôl* instruct me [yissērūnī]” (v. 7). Several things are noteworthy here.

First, the verbs “counsel” and “instruct” in verse 7 are native to wisdom lore; they have to do with moral and spiritual teaching and formation. Secondly, while this teaching and formation comes ultimately from YHWH, it comes through the psalmist’s *kēlāyôl*, that is, his deep, interior, embodied sense of moral and spiritual realities as pertaining to the world of flesh-and-blood existence.<sup>38</sup>

Thirdly, the psalmist is instructed by, or through, his *kēlāyôl* at *night* (Ps 16:7), when his daytime consciousness is inactive and he awakes, in the “consciousness” of a dream state (Bachelard, take note!), to the deeper wisdom of what we would call his unconscious, the wisdom arising out of his “unthought known.” (Compare Jacob’s “ladder” visitation, while asleep at the sanctuary in Bethel.) Presumably this nighttime “instruction” addresses existential concerns of the sort that might lead some to worship other gods but that, through the psalmist’s faithfulness to this “counsel,” issues in steadfastness with YHWH as place of refuge (v. 1). Finally, there is the affirmation in verse 9: “Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul [*kēbôdī*, literally, “my glory”] rejoices; / my body [*běšārī*, “flesh”] also dwells [*yiskōn*] secure [*lābetāh*].”

The last word here, *betāh*, derives from a verb which means “to trust,” as, for example, in Psalm 22:4–5; so that when a causative form of this verb occurs in Psalm 22:9, “You are he who took me from the womb; you *kept me safe* [*mabīḥī*] upon my mother’s breasts,” the connotation that underlies the translation is that God caused the psalmist to trust (or rest safe/ secure) on his mother’s breasts. It is this concrete, organic context for this psalmist’s originary experience of *trust/safety* that underlies, I suggest, the image, in v. 9, of the psalmist’s *flesh* abiding in *betāh*. The holistic feeling-sense in this verse has moral-spiritual, affective, and physiological aspects. When, then, the psalmist in 139:13 speaks of God as forming her *kēlāyôl*, in the “secret place” of her mother’s womb, it should be clear that the psalmist employs this term with a double reference—not only to her kidneys as such, but to this organ as the seat-and-symbol of her innermost, deepest awareness of God, the innermost locus of her sense of safety, and thereby the compass that keeps her oriented trustingly and faithfully toward God in the face of enticements by her enemies to go after other gods.

### **Naïve Trust and the Vicissitudes of Experience**

I want, now, to characterize such radical trust as *naïve*, in the root sense of that

38 Here, and in Ps 139:13, NJPS renders *kēlāyôl* with “conscience.”

word, cognate with *natal*, “new-born.” According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, the adjective can mean, among other things, “deficient in worldly wisdom or informed judgment; especially: credulous,” or “not previously subjected to experimentation or a particular experimental situation.”<sup>39</sup> In the face of the Psalter’s largest group of psalms, the psalms of complaint, and in view of the experience of Job, how seriously can we take the affirmation of safety in Psalm 139? Anyone who has heard an infant’s bewildered cry of pain at its first earache will know how quickly naïve, indiscriminating trust can give way to the awareness of the world as a place of pains as well as pleasures, of danger as well as safety, of betrayal as well as trustworthiness, of evil as well as goodness.

Consider, in similar vein, the following voices: In Psalm 22 the speaker acknowledges (22:4–5) how the ancestors “trusted [*bātēhū*], and were not disappointed”; but, under a sense of God’s abandonment, he cries out, “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; / you kept me safe [*mabṭīhī*]<sup>40</sup> on my mother’s breast. / On you I was cast from my birth, / and since my mother bore me you have been my God.” This cry of dereliction arises out of the painful difference between that primal sense of security and the psalmist’s present situation.

Job portrays his conception, birth, and early nurture in even more graphic terms (Job 10:10–12), but only to contrast this early idyllic picture with his present agonizing situation (10:13). As he puts it in his first soliloquy, in chapter 3, “Why did I not die at birth, / come forth from the womb and expire? / Why did the knees receive me? / Or why the breasts, that I should *suck* [*yānaq*]?” (Job 3:11–12) To have died at birth would be to have been spared all the trouble that ensues.

Then there is Jeremiah, whose awareness of having been known and consecrated while in his mother’s womb (Jer 1:5), seems (all but) erased by his subsequent sufferings at the hands of his adversaries, moving him, like Job in Job 3, to curse the day he was born (Jer 20:14–18). This, after God’s promise that, in the face of his enemies, “I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls” (Jer 1:18).

This then raises the question of the realism of the *sanctuary* picture in Psalm 139 as I have been reading it. For, is there anything more vulnerable in a war-torn world than a pregnant woman and her nascent child (2 Kgs 8:12)? What of a crack baby, invaded by toxic substances while yet in the womb? What of those traumas that so scar the body-and-soul as to render such primal awareness all but inaccess-

39 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/naïve>.

40 The basic, Qal form of the verb means “to trust”; in the present instance the Hiphil or causative form can mean, “to cause to trust,” as though God as the midwife lay the newborn psalmist on its mother’s breast to give it its first post-natal experience of an external world that it could trust. In that sense, the newborn’s naïve trust is not without experiential confirmation, whatever may follow.

ible?<sup>41</sup> What kind of image of safety is Psalm 139:15, vis-à-vis the vicissitudes of the world as we know it? In the face of such vulnerability, such challenge to naïve trust, I propose that it is precisely in this psalm that we find, in their most radical form, the implications of Richard Middleton's argument concerning Genesis 1, as giving us the liberating account of how we are called to image God as non-violent creator of all things.

Let me return to Job, who in chapter 14 asks, "If a man [*gever*] dies, shall he live again?" I note the imagery in which he briefly conceives the possibility.

Oh that you would *hide* me [*tašpinēnī*] in Sheol,  
that you would *conceal* me [*tastirēnī*] until your wrath is past,  
that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!  
All the days of my service I would wait,  
till my renewal should come.  
You would call, and I would answer you;  
you would long for the work [*ma'aseh*] of your hands.  
(Job 14:13–15)

Here, Sheol would become—of all things!—a "safe house" for the time being, until God would, in a microcosmic version of, for example, Isaiah 48:13, call on Job to "stand forth" into life renewed. It is often noted that when Job, in the Prologue, says, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there," the word "there" refers to the grave or Sheol; and it is often noted that the poetic parallelism intimates some sort of semantic connection between Sheol and the womb—just as we have it in Psalm 139, where the mother's womb is also called "the depths of the earth." Strikingly, then, Job's brief, hypothetical vision, in which his death would not be the end, but rather the point of a new creation, re-frames post-mortem Sheol as a place in which God would *conceal* him (the verbal cognate of our noun, *sēter*, "hiding-place, sanctuary").

In this brief conception, Job derives his "eschatological" imagery,<sup>42</sup> I suggest, from his originary experience in the womb as a theater of God's "care" and "steadfast love" (10:12). Though he falls back from this vision in 14:13–15, the imagery that generates it intrigues me. And I note that, although his hopeful vision in chapter 14 is fleeting, *something* enables him, in 27:1–6, to take an oath of innocence with "the breath that is in me, / and the spirit of God in my nostrils." That is, he anchors his standing before God in the very life and breath that God

41 For a sobering prognosis in the case of profound trauma, see Bessel van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Post Traumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1(5) (1994): 253–65, accessible online at <http://www.trauma-pages.com/a/vanderk4.php>.

42 Note the similarity of the language in Job 8:7 and 42:12 with "former/latter" language in Isaiah 40–55.



has given him. And his second, more elaborate oath in chapter 31 includes a disavowal (31:26–27) of the sort of idolatry that enticed Jeremiah’s compatriots.<sup>43</sup> Even though his brief vision in 14:13–15, quickly fades with the emphatic “but” (*wəʾūlām*) of 14:18, the fidelity in these later oaths testifies, however fugitively, to a deep, perhaps unconscious trust whose roots are reflected in the imagery of the “shoots” of 14:7 (literally “suckers” [*yōneqet*], echoing the verb “suck” in 3:12), budding at the *scent* of water (14:9).

The prominence of the imagery of rain in God’s address in chapter 39 suggests the power of the generative scenario in that chapter to revive Job in accordance with his brief vision. For the divine speeches convey Job’s sense of the cosmos as an all-encompassing *building*,<sup>44</sup> at the foundations of which (Job 38:2–6) all the denizens of heaven erupt in a unison of *praise* (38:7), and his sense that this cosmos is pervaded by generative, and nourishing and restorative (38:26–27) potency. If we take the prose conclusion to this book as integral to Job’s story, and if we follow NJPS in its translation of the very last verse—“So Job died old and contented” (the last verb means, literally, “sated”)—we may be entitled to see in this narrator’s comment, as well as in Job’s willingness to pray for friends who had so egregiously assaulted him with their accusations, signs of what Paul Ricoeur has called “second naïveté.” As in Job’s story, such naïveté is hard-won. Where it is arrived at, it attests a trustworthy Presence that underlies all life in the face of all the evils and outrages of the world.

Such Joban “second naïveté” testifies in its own way to what Oliver O’Donovan calls “the vindication of creation.” O’Donovan writes, “We are driven to concentrate on the resurrection as our starting-point because it tells us of God’s vindication of his creation. . . . [T]he resurrection of Christ is a new affirmation of God’s first decision that Adam should live.”<sup>45</sup> If O’Donovan means, in the first instance, God’s vindication of the divine *action* and *intention* in *creating* the world and humankind in it, I take his phrasing also, in a secondary sense as God’s vindicating the *creation*, vindicating all God’s creatures, in the face of all the evils that have assaulted it and them. Such a reading of O’Donovan’s phrasing, in the

43 They worshipped “the queen of heaven” (Jer 7:18; 44:17–25). Some commentators take Job’s “covenant” with his eyes to not “look on a virgin” (31:1) to be a reference to the virgin goddess Ishtar.

44 Job’s sudden transformed sense of the cosmos as shot through with divine presence and address has the effect on him that entry into the sanctuary has for the psalmist in Psalm 73. For such a relation between sanctuary and cosmos, see Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1969), chap. 7: “Cosmos and Microcosm,” 78–99, esp. 99: “To view creation within the precincts of the Temple is to summon up an *ideal world* that is far from the mundane reality of profane life and its persistent evil. It is that ideal world which is the result of God’s creative labors.”

45 Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 13–14.

light of Romans 8, leads me to conclude this essay with a few brief remarks on the thematics of “the secret place” of Psalm 139 as echoed in the New Testament.

### Echoes of the *Secret Place* in the New Testament

When the angel announces to Mary, “the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35), the verb “overshadow,” *episkiazō*, resonates with connotations of *protection*, as it does in all four of its occurrences in the Septuagint. According to Exodus 40:35, “Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled [*epeskiasen*] upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” Psalm 91, which opens with “One who dwells in the shelter [*bēsēlēr*] of the Most High [sic], / who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,” continues, in verse 4 with, “he will cover [*episkiasēi*] you with his pinions [*pterygas*], / and under his wings you will find refuge [*teḥseh*].”

Ironically, it is precisely through the words of Psalm 91 that Satan tempts Jesus to idolatrous conceptions of God’s safekeeping. By the time of Jesus, this psalm would be construed in the first instance as referring to David as author and royal Patron of the Psalter. Insofar, then, as Psalm 2, concerning God’s anointed (royal) son, ends on the note, “Blessed are all who take refuge [*hōsē*] in him”; and insofar as “David” affirms, in Psalm 140:7, “O LORD, my Lord, my strong deliverer, / you have covered [*epeskiasas*] my head in the day of battle”; and insofar as the image of the “pinnacle” (*pterygion*) of the temple to which Satan takes Jesus, in quoting Psalm 91, might evoke the connotations of God’s sheltering wings [*pterygas*],” Jesus might well be tempted to misconstrue the nature of the security that he as God’s anointed Son may anticipate (compare the imagery in Matt 23:37!). That those temptations are endemic to humankind—not least to those enjoying stations of power—is suggested by the (ironic?) observation in Proverbs 18:11, “A rich man’s wealth is his strong city, / and like a high wall protecting [*episkiazei*] him.”

When the angel says, further, to Mary, “a sword shall pierce your own heart also” (Luke 2:35), I suggest that Mary’s earlier response, “behold the handmaiden of the Lord” (Luke 1:38), signals her faithfulness to the *ancient way*; and as such, it humanly grounds Jesus’ steadfast resistance to Satan’s enticement—he remains loyal to the *ancient way* that he and Mary have trodden together in organic resonance. So, when the Word through whom all things were made becomes flesh and tabernacles among us, and then a spear pierces his own side, the pains he therein shares with Mary his mother are pains that they share with the whole creation that groans in *travail* and in *pain together*.<sup>46</sup> For that, finally, is the place of safety in

46 It is within such a frame of reference that I read the exchange between Myrna Landers and Armand Gamache in Louise Penny’s novel, *The Long Way Home* (New York: Minotaur Books, 2014), 146: “‘So you have to leave sanctuary in order to have it?’ she asked. ‘You did,’ he said.”

God—the place in which, like Mary, like Jesus, we accept the risk of vulnerable, organic *solidarity and participation* in the *travail of the New Creation's coming into being*, and we discover that in doing so we participate in the *travail of God*, whose Spirit *groans* in intercession for us, to the end that, if we suffer *together*, we shall be glorified *together*.